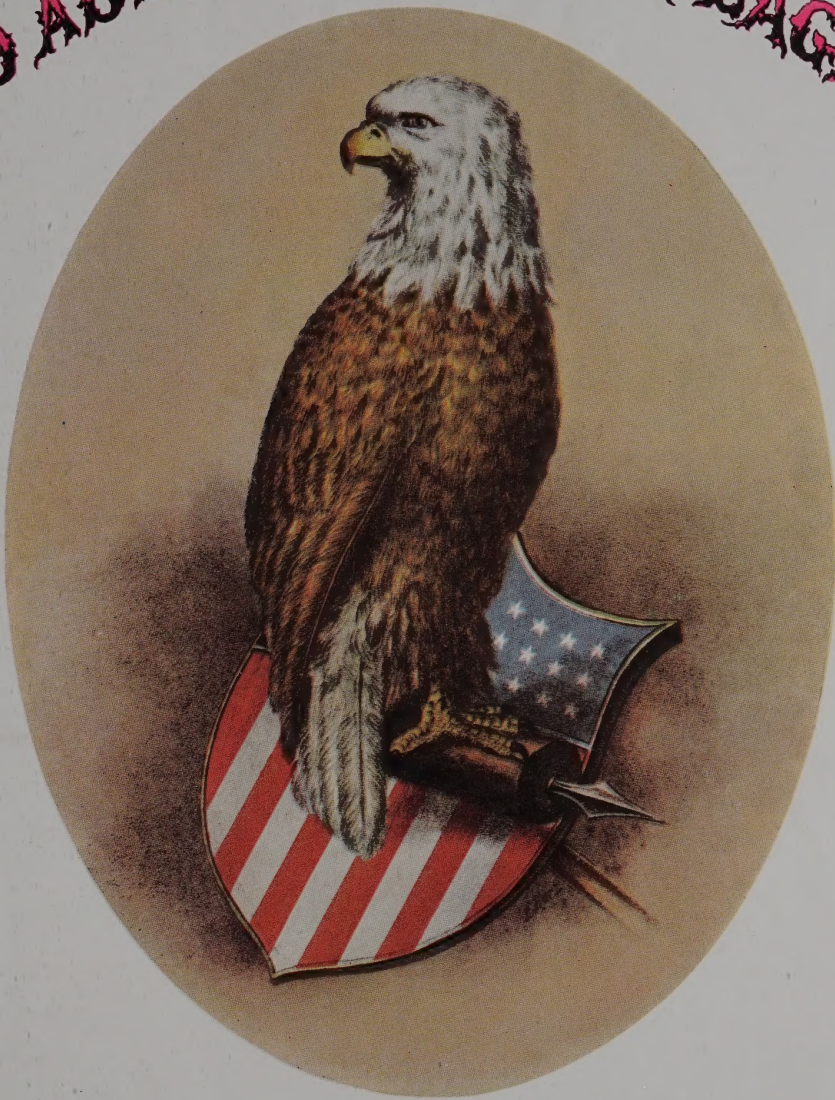
"OLD ABE" THE BATTLE EAGLE



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The (mostly) true legend of a Wisconsin outfit's mascot who dodged shells, whined about the chow, and became an honored veteran, living a life of ease at state expense

By BRUCE CATTON

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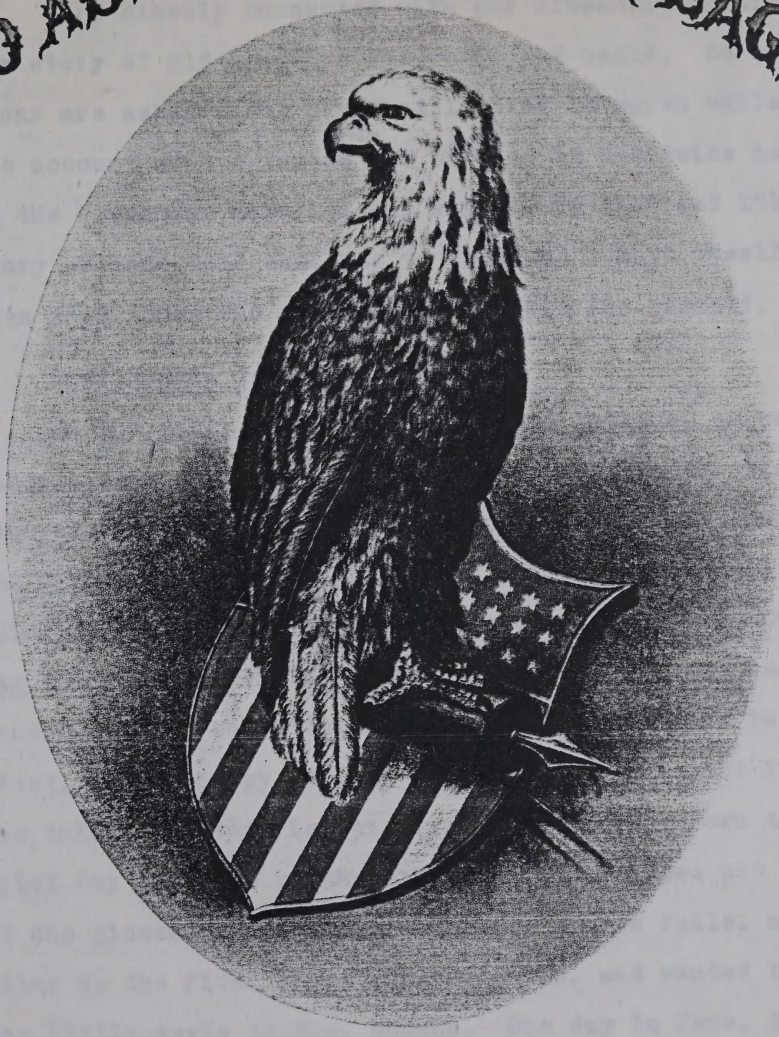

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OLD ABE, THE WISCONSIN WAR EAGLE

Rood, Hosea W., Madison Wisconsin, March 1921
"A Little Flag Book" # 3
Rood was Department Patriotic Instructor
for the Grand Army of the Republic

Very closely connected with our Wisconsin battle flags is the story of Old Abe, the Wisconsin war eagle. So many questions are asked about him that I think it worth while to reprint the account of the famous old bird as it has twice been given in the Wisconsin Memorial Day Annual--in 1904 and 1918. The story as here told conforms to facts as I have myself heard them from those who personally knew Old Abe himself.

Mrs. McCann Tells Her Story:

In the early spring of 1861, some Indians, as was their custom, went up the Flambeau river to make maple sugar. While thus engaged in the heavy timber of Price county they found an eagle's nest in a tall pine tree. There is some difference of opinion as to just where that pine tree stood. If Chief Sky, the young Indian who got a baby eagle out of that nest, were here I know he could tell us all about it, but he is now, I trust, in the happy hunting grounds where all good Indians go. One thing, however, is certain: On their way down the river Chief Sky and some of the other Indians stopped one April day at the pioneer home of Daniel McCann at Jim Falls, about ten miles up the fiver from Chippewa Falls, and wanted to sell the little eagle to Mrs. McCann. One day in June, 1903, I had the pleasure of visiting Mrs. McCann at her home in Chippewa Falls. Though she was then eighty-three years old, her memory was still good, and she told me this story about the bird, that, all unguessed by her, was to become so famous:

"Yes," said she, "I think it was along in April when Chief Sky and some of his friends stopped at our house at Jim Falls and wanted to sell me a young bird they called an eagle. He was not then old enough to fly. I told them I believed it was a young crow, but they declared it was an eagle. I said I had no use for him, yet they were quite anxious to make a trade. At last I told them I would give them a bag of corn standing by the door--about a bushel of it, I guess. That satisfied them, so they took the corn and left the bird. As he could not yet fly it was not much trouble to keep him. It was not long, thought, before he got so he could use his wings a little, and then he'd bother us about getting away. Sometimes he'd get clear down below the Falls, as much as a half a mile from the house; and the children would have to keep running after him to keep him from getting away for good. He got to be ugly, too, and we had to tie him up.

"After a while he came to be so much of a plague that we made up our minds to get rid of him in some way. My husband took him down to CHippewa Falls and tried to sell him to some soldiers that were going to the war; but they did not seem to care for him. After that he took him down to Eau Claire, and he was bought for a company of soldiers there. I never saw him again. I have heard that they carried him into battle, and that folks ever since then have made a great fuss over him."

This is Mrs. McCann's story. I am glad to have heard her tell it in person. She was born in Manitoba on New Year's day, 1820. After her marriage she came to the Chippewa country to live. She didd at Chippewa Falls November 9, 1903.

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Thus is the Mosann's story. I am glad to have heard her
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try to live. She died at Chippewa Falls November 9, 1903.

The Young Bird Gets Into The Army:

At Eau Claire Captain John E. Perkins was raising a company of soldiers for the Civil War, after the call of President Abraham Lincoln for troops to protect the Union. The company had been named the Eau Claire Badgers. When Mr. McCann brought the young eagle there Captain Perkins' boys were greatly interested in the bird. Some of them thought it would be a fine thing to enlist him in the company and carry him with them to war; and so upon payment of five dollars he came to be a member of that company. In his honor the name of the company was changed from the "Eau Claire Badgers" to the "Eau Claire Eagles."

On the 6th of September Captain Perkins and his company started for Camp Randall, at Madison. They went upon a little steamboat down the Chippewa and Mississippi rivers to La Crosse, and from there by rail to Madison. It is said that at LaCrosse a gentleman offered two hundred dollars for the eagle, but Captain Perkins told him the men would not sell their pet. They had begun to think a great deal of him, and he was rising in value. First, bought for a bushel of corn, then for five dollars, and now worth more than two hundred dollars! What do you suppose good Mrs. McCann thought when she heard of that?

When this Eau Claire company arrived at Madison and marched from the station along the streets out to Camp Randall it attracted a great deal of attention, all on account of the young eagle. I have heard it said that when the men passed through the gate into camp he, seeming to feel the importance of the occasion, did something that stirred the heart of every man with patriotic pride: with his beak he seized one corner

of the flag floating over him, spread wide his wings and kept them flapping, flapping, while the company marched across camp to report at headquarters.

By common consent the eagle, though only about six months old, came to be called "Old Abe," after our good president, Abraham Lincoln. Thousands of people, some of them distinguished men and women, came to camp in those days to see the soldiers, and they found there nothing more attractive and interesting than Old Abe. The Eau Claire Eagles was made to be Company C of the Eights Wisconsin infantry, which soon came to be known as the Eagle Regiment.

A handsome perch was made for Old Abe to stand upon. It was in the form of a shield, and fashioned like a slanting platform on the top of a six-foot staff. Six inches above the shield there was a cross-piece for the perch. On this shield the stars and stripes were painted, also "8th Regt. W.V." A man was detailed to take special care of the bird and to carry him on the march. He wore a belt to which a socket was attached. Into this socket he set the staff and held it erect with his right hand. In this way Old Abe was lifted into plain sight above the heads of the men. His place in the line of march was in the center of the regiment and alongside the colors. He and his perch made quite a load for the man who carried him.

On the 12th of October, 1861, the Eagle Regiment left Camp Randall for service in the South. At every stopping place Old Abe was quite a curiosity. When the regiment marched

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through the streets of Chicago, from one railway station to another, the one Eagle attracted more attention than the thousand Badgers. All the newspapers printed something about the Wisconsin Eagle that was going to the war.

When the Eighth arrived in St. Louis some of the southern folks tried to make fun of Old Abe by calling him a crow, a goose, and a turkey buzzard. He seemed to like neither the names nor the people. He stooped, spread his wings, made a spring and broke his cord, flew over the heads of the people, flapping off several caps and bonnets with his wings, then flew to the top of the chimney of an aristocratic mansion, whence he looked down with seeming contempt upon the crowd below--as if he would say, "You see I am neither crow, goose nor buzzard, but the American liberty bird himself!" His sudden dash for freedom created no small stir among the soldiers, expecially Company C. They began to fear that he liked liberty too well to stay with them. But after a half hour of sight-seeing he came down and was easily caught by one of the men.

A gentleman in St. Louis offered five hundred dollars for Old Abe, but Captain Perkins gave his ready-made answer, "no money can buy him." It is said that some time after this a man offered a valuable farm for him, yet all to no purpose. He was, you see, all the time rising in value. If Mrs. McCann, up in her little home at Jim Falls could only have known what a prize bird she had traded with Chief Sky for that bushel of corn!

From St. Louis the Eagle Regiment marched away to do almost four years of hard service for the Union. It was in thirty-eight battles and skirmishes, and Abe was in nearly every one of them. Wherever the men went, he went. He was their daily companion in camp, on the march, and in the thick of the fight. He came to know personally every many in his ownown company and many others in the regiment. He knew, also, his regiment and its flag from all others, and came to be strangely attached to the men he was with every day; and they were not only proud of him but loved him. When they were not on duty they spent much time in teaching him all kinds of tricks, until he came to be a pretty well educated bird. I am told that for some men he took a particular liking, while for certain others he would have very little to do. I guess that most animals have a pretty sure way of their own for the study of human nature. Now and then a man with a rather poor notion of good fun would torment Abe until he was angry. The bird would not forget such treatment, and sometimes when he could get at a fellow with so mean a spirit he would pay him off with good interest. His hooked beak and sharp claws more than once taught such a person to respect him. Nearly every man in the regiment would share his ration with Abe. There were times when both he and his comrades had to go hungry. Whenever the boys went foraging for provisions they took pains to find a bit of fresh meat of some kind for him, as he could not very well feed on hardtack, bacon and coffee.

There was another regimental pet, a dog named Frank that had joined the Eighth at Madison. Old Abe took a liking to

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There was another regimental pet, a dog named Frank that had joined the flight at Madison. Old Abe took a liking to

Frank--and for a very good reason. Frank was a good hunter. He spent a part of his time scurrying through the woods here and there, and sometimes he brought in a squirrel or a rabbit. This game generally went to Abe. Whenever he heard Frank barking in the woods he showed a lively interest in every sound coming from that direction, and was delighted when the hunt had been successful.

During the war Old Abe had from time to time six different keepers. However he might regard other men, he was always on good terms with those who cared for him. Comrades who served in the regiment tell me that he had a particular liking for Edward Homiston, his bearer from October 1862 to September 1863. Ed had been reared in the mountains of Vermont, and had as a boy studied eagles as he saw them wild and free. Ed and Abe were like brothers and understood each other well. John M. Williams, a member of Company H of the Eighth, wrote an interesting history of his regiment. On page 52 he says:

"Mr. Homiston translates the eagle's idiom into English. He found Abe to vary his tones according to his emotions. When surprised he whistled a wild melody tones to a melancholy softness; when hovering over his food he gave a spiteful chuckle; when pleased to see an old friend he said, in plaintive cooing, 'How do you do?' In battle his scream was wild and commanding five or six notes in succession--with a most startling thrill that was perfectly inspiring to the soldiers."

Old Abe's daily degree of freedom in camp was as much as he could get out of thirty feet of cord, one end of which was tied to a leather ring around his leg, the other fastened to his perch. While on the march or in battle he was allowed only

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about three feet of his cord. He sometimes longed for larger liberty and, having a spite against the cord that held him, would keep biting at it with his strong, hooked beak until it was nearly cut in two. Then with a sudden spring he would break loose. Comrade Williams, of whom I have spoken, told me that once he thus broke away just as the regiment was starting on a march. He flew up in the air and then around and around--everybody was excited. Many of the men left the ranks, running here and there where they thought he would alight, so as to catch him. Some of them went into the woods a mile away, thinking he might come down among the trees. Ed Homiston, his keeper, persuaded the rest of the men to keep quiet and let him manage the capture. He had the regimental flag placed by his perch where Old Abe could see it, and he sat down there and waited. Having enjoyed an hour of free exercise, the runaway-flyaway, perhaps I would better say--quietly dropped down to his perch beside the flag. After Ed had fastened his cord, all was ready for the march to Memphis.

Comrade Williams tells me that during the summer of 1862 the Eagle needed no rope to keep him from flying away, as some one had secretly clipped his tail feathers and those of one wing. The men were indignant because of this mean trick. Could they have found out who did it they would have made life a burden for him until Old Abe's feathers had grown out to full length again. The glory of the eagle is to fly higher and more boldly into the free air of heaven than any other bird. This, I suspect, is why he is called the "liberty bird". I do not wonder that eveyy true soldier of the Eighth was

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indignant because the bird of which they were so proud had thus been robbed of his glory. Spirit, energy, love of freedom, are all of too great value to destroy in either boy, man or bird of freedom just for the sake of holding him down.

In some of the published stories about Old Abe he is said to have had his freedom in certain battles, especially at Corinth, and that he would fly above the clouds of smoke, screaming as if to urge the men below him to greater deeds of daring. Captain Dawes who commanded a company of the Eighth once wrote a story of Old Abe in which he said that at the battle of Corinth a bullet cut the cord that held him; that he flew high over the battle, and before long he came swooping down to his perch again.

Old Abe was carried right into the thick of many a heavy battle. He seemed as well as the men to understand the danger there. He often trembled--looked anxiously this way and that as the battle raged back and forth; yet when the combat became fierce he, like the men who were fighting, seemed to forget the danger. As the bullets began to fly thick and fast and bells to burst all around him he would scream terrifically. He would stand by a cannon as it was being fired, and seemed to delight in the rattle of musketry. Army correspondents in those days wrote many things about Old Abe's conduct in battle. Colonel Jefferson, commander of the Eighth at Corinth, said, "In battle he was almost constantly flapping his wings--his mouth wide open--and many a time screamed with wild enthusiasm.

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Though the Confederates showed so much contempt for Old Abe by calling him Yankee Buzzard and other names that were not nice, they were particularly anxious to capture him. Their officers gave them orders either to kill the buzzard or catch him. They knew well that the Eighth would fight harder with the eagle and for him than without him. The Confederate General Price told his men that he would rather capture the Eagle than a whole brigade of men or a dozen battle flags. But the boys of the gallant Eighth were determined not to let the enemy get their pet bird. Though they often fought to the dath for their colors, they would have battled yet more valiantly for their eagle. He meant just as much to them as their flag--perhaps more.

I saw Old Abe myself once during the war. One day early in December 1862 my regiment, the Twelfth Wisconsin, was marching toward the front in a skirmish near Waterford, Mississippi. The Eighth was in line alongside the road. As we came near, one of our boys said, "This is the Eighth Wisconsin, and there is their eagle close by the flag." As we appraached Old Abe was standing quietly on his perch, but when our flag came in front of him he arose to his full height, spread his broad wings and flapped them three or four times, after which he settled down and watched us march by. It is a real pleasure to me now, fifty-eight years after, to remember having seen Old Abe thus salute Old Glory that day down in Mississippi. Both the eagle and our flag came to be cherished relics in the Wisconsin state capitol.

In the early part of January, 1864, a majority of the men of the Eighth reenlisted for another three years of service--if needed that long. Old Abe reenlisted, too. The government grantéd to every one who thus pledged continued service a furlough of thirty days to go home and see his friends. You may think Old Abe had no home folks to visit, yet the reenlisted veterans brought him with them to Eau Claire. Everybody there, and all along the route he traveled, was his friend. He had come to be a gallant veteran, and all who saw him gave him as much attention as if he had been a general.

While these veterans were home the men at the front were in two battles; and Old Abe missed them. In battle the color bearers of a regiment are in greater danger than other men in the line. The enemy is apt to direct his fire upon the flags in front of him, and the men carrying them are in special danger. The sharpest fighting takes place around the battle flags, for he who captures a flag gets great credit for it. Most color-bearers will die before giving up their flags. Old Abe was carried in battle alongside his regimental colors. He knew nothing better than the Stars and Stripes. They waved above him on the march, and in the smoke of battle. The Confederates sent shot and shell at the colors until they were torn and battle-scarred. The sharp-shooters took special aim at the men who bore them, yet they tried in particular to hit Old Abe and whoever bore him alongside Old Glory. For all this, however, but one of the six brave fellows who carried him at different times during the war was even wounded. One of them died of disease. Two or three times bullets cut Old Abe's feathers. One of them drew a bit of blood from his right wing,

and this little wound so annoyed him that in his own language, he scolded and fretted about it. The God of Freedom must have watched with peculiar care over this Liberty Bird and his gallant bearers.

In three years the term of service of some of the men of the Eighth came to an end, they were discharged and sent home. It was thought best to send Old Abe with them. Then there arose the question: "Where in Wisconsin shall be his home?" Some men wanted to give him to Eau Claire County. Others declared that he belonged to all of Wisconsin, and that he should be presented by the regiment to the State. Other held that, as his reputation had come to be nation-wide, he should be sent to Washington. A vote was taken, and it was thus decided that Old Abe should be given into the care of the state. On the 26th day of September, 1864, Captain Victor Wolf of Company C of the 8th--Captain Perkins had died of wounds--formally presented to Wisconsin its famous war eagle, Old Abe.

Captain Wolf said, in addressing the Governor at the Capitol, that Abe had been a good soldier--had never flinched in battle nor shirked duty in camp; that Company C had been proud of him, had taken good care of him,and that he hoped the State would do as well by him. Governor Lewis, in behalf of the state, received Old Abe, assuring Captain Wolf that all Wisconsin would ever be proud of the soldier bird, and give him the best of care.

A large room in the basement of the Capitol was fitted up as a home for Old Abe, and a man was appointed to be his keeper, and to care for him. Everything was done for his comfort. A pole was fastened to the tops of two posts in the park,

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and on pleasant days he was kept there in the open air. He was visited by thousands of people from all parts of the country -- everybod seemed to know about him. Stories and verses were written about him, and some of them got into the school readers of those days. In this way the boys and girls in school came to know something of the story of Old Abe, the Wisconsin soldier-bird of Liberty.

For some years after the war the famous bird was carried to many great gatherings in the United States. There he was a greater attraction than any other. Men, women and children would gather around him, gaze upon him, and ask all sorts of questions of his keeper. Though a famous bird in the war, he came to be a great deal more so in time of peace. He was taken to celebrations, fairs, monument dedications and reunions in Chicago, Milwaukee, Peoria, Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities. He was at the Centennial in Philadelphia, and at a great fair in Boston nearly three months. I am told that in some cases five dollars were paid for single feathers that had dropped from his wings. But Old Abe's feathers were not for sale to pluck. Once a wealthy man offered $10,000 for Old Abe, and P. T. Barnum, the great showman, went so far as to offer $20,000 for him! But Old Abe was way above the value of gold.

Again I wonder what Mrs. McCann in her little log cabin could have thought had she heard how the eagle had risen in value--a bushel of corn, five dollars, twoo hundred dollars, five hundred dollars, a valuable farm, $10,000, $20,000!

Several persons told me stories about Old Abe when he lived at the Capitol. I will relate two of them. The first was told by an old lady who had lived long in Madison, the wife

and on pleasant days he was kept there in the open air. He was visited by thousands of people from all parts of the country -- everybody seemed to know about him. Stories and verses were written about him, and some of them got into the school readers of those days. In this way the boys and girls in school came to know something of the story of Old Abe, the Wisconsin soldier-bird of history.

For some years after the war the famous bird was carried to many great gatherings in the United States. There he was a greater attraction than any other. Men, women and children would gather around him, come upon him, and ask all sorts of questions of his keeper. Though a famous bird in the war, he came to be a great deal more so in time of peace. He was taken to celebrations, fairs, monument dedications and reunions in Chicago, Milwaukee, Memphis, Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities. He was at the Centennial in Philadelphia, and at a great fair in Boston nearly three months. I am told that in some cases five dollars were paid for single feathers that had dropped from his wings. But Old Abe's feathers were not for sale to plume. Once a wealthy man offered $10,000 for Old Abe, and P. T. Barnum, the great showman, went so far as to offer $20,000 for him! But Old Abe was way above the value of gold.

Again I wonder what Mrs. McCann in her little log cabin could have thought had she heard how the eagle had risen in value--a bunch of corn, five dollars, two hundred dollars, five hundred dollars, a valuable farm, $10,000, $20,000!

Several persons told me stories about Old Abe when he lived at the Capitol. I will relate two of them. The first was told by an old lady who had lived long in Madison, the wife

of a soldier of the 23rd Wisconsin.

"One day about five years after the war I was standing on the street corner over there by the jewelry store, when I heard a man say to three or four companions, 'Say, boys, let's go over to the Capitol and see Old Abe, the war eagle. I was in the army with him, and I haven't seen him since. Come on boys!'

"I thought I would like to see this man meet his old feathered comrade, so I walked quickly around another way to where the bird sat on his perch near the building. As the men came along they got sight of him before he saw them. The soldier gave a peculiar whistle, at which Old Abe, quick as a flash, straightened himself up and listened intently. The man gave the whistle again, and the bird became excited. He looked all about to see where that whistle came from. His eye was bright, his head erect, and he seemed all expectation. Just then the men walked up before him. He recognized at once the man who had whistled, and plainly manifested his satisfaction. The soldier too was delighted--glad to find that his feathered comrade had not forgotten him. When he went up close Old Abe put his head beside his face, and seemed as pleased as a young kitten to be fondled and petted. This token of affection touched the soldier's heart. He put his arms around Old Abe, and tears came into his eyes. 'Boys,' said he, 'I would not have missed this for a hundred dollars!'"

The other story was told to me by an old veteran of the 8th Wisconsin. "Old Abe," said he, "was a bird of no little dignity of character. He did not like to be trifled with. If

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a person fooled with him in the army he showed displeasure.

"One day while he was yet alive at the Capitol I came to Madison, and as usual, went over to call upon him. He was standing on his pole in the park. John and Mary, a young couple from the country, had come in that day with an excursion party. They got a bag of peanuts and a stick of gum, and were having a big time. They came along the walk to Old Abe and stopped to take a look at him. He did not pay much attention to them, for he was used to seeing young couples such as they eveyy day. As they stood before him Mary began to strike at his beak with the end of her scarf. Abe stepped quietly along on his pole to get out of her reach. I could see by his eye, however, that he felt annoyed at the liberties she was taking. The pert young miss followed him, still flirting her scarf in his eyes. Abe kept backing up, yet began uttering sharp, spiteful notes of warning. This pleased Mary, so she giggled and flirted some more.

"I could see that trouble was brewing, and so I said to her, 'Please pardon me, Miss, but I do not think you'd better trifle any more with Abe; he may make trouble for you. I was with him in the army three years and know something of his temper. I think you have gone about far enough' To this John replied, 'Never mind us, Uncle, we know enough to take care of ourselfes. We wasn't born last week' And then Mary gave another flirt with the end of her scarf. Quicker than a wink Old Abe had his sharp claws deep in her arm just above her wrist. The smart young miss howed the folks how she could scream. She easily out-screamed Old Abe in battle. The angry

bird was just about to seize her with his sharp, hooked beak, when I caught him by his neck. He was in a terrible passion. He and Mary and I had a time of it! After some scolding, much coaxing, and a bit of choking I got his claws out of her arm. It was a fearful wound, and I felt sorry for the smart young miss as she and John went hunting for a doctor. I'll bet she'll remember Old Abe as long as she lives!"

And now I must tell of the untimely death of this famous old eagle. One day in February of the cold winter of 1881, some paints and oils kept in a room near his in the Capitol got afire, no one knows how, yet I suspect by spontaneous combustion. Dense clouds of smoke and bad-smelling gases filled the corridors and the cage room. The people overhead heard Abe give a scream, and ran below to see what was the matter. They went through the dense sknoke and opened the cage door. Old Abe flew out, and along the corridor. He was not only frightened by the smoke, but suffocated because of the gas in his lungs. He was not well after that. All the Eagle had gone out of him. He lived about a month longer, and on the 28th of March, 1881, with a few of his old friends around him, died in the arms of George Gillies, his keeper. Those who saw him feebly flap his once strong wings and then sink back dead felt sad indeed. Some of those old comrades who say by him shed tears of manly grief, for a brave spirit had taken its departure.

General George E. Brant, at that time Quartermaster General of the State, was one of those present at Old Abe's death. He has told me that after they knew he was dead a number of

old soldiers gathered in the office of Governor Smith and discussed the question as to what should be done with the body. Some thought there should be a kind of military funeral, and that he should be buried in beautiful Forest Hill cemetery near Madison, the final resting place of many Wisconsin soldiers. Major C. G. Mayers, late of the 11th Wiscons, said that he could mount the bird so that he could be kept for many years in honored remembrance of his service. Major Mayers' plan pleased the most of those present, and so Governor Smith gave the body over to him. He soon had the skin so mounted that it looked very much like Old Abe alive. General Bryant had a fine glass case made for him; and in this he was on exhibition hearly a quarter of a century. The perch on which he was mounted was like that on which he was carried in the army, and so every one who saw him during those years got a pretty good idea of his appearance in war times.

During that time his glads house stood in various places--in the rotunda of the Capitol, in the state historical rooms of the Capitol, and in the present historical building near the university. In April, 1903, he was placed in the new Grand Army Memorial Hall in the Capitol. Though dead, he was carried in many patriotic processions. Whenever his mounted figure was kept or carried, he seemed to attract as much attention as he had done when alive. In fact, interest in him seemed all the time to be increasing. Every year thousands of people came into the Grand Army rooms to look upon him and ask questions about him. One day a man, after looking a long time at Old Abe, said to me, "If ever I were led to fight against my

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country, the sight of that noble bird would make me thrown down my weapons and give up the battle; for the eagle is the emblem of my country's freedom, and I could not fight against him and all he stands for;" I heard more than one say something like this. The old survivors of the 8th Wisconsin, the Eagle regiment, say they fought the hardest for the flag when Old Abe was in sight!

It mattered little whence Old Abe's visitors came, all knew more or less about him. One day a small boy stood before him in big-eyed observation. I asked him if he had ever heard of Old Abe. "Oh yes', said he, "I have heard ever-so-much about him". Then I asked how he had come to hear so much. "Well," he replied, I have read in books about him, and heard people talk about him'. When I asked where he lived he told me that his home was in Phoenix, Arizona. The little fellow studied Old Abe with careful interest. When he got back to school in far-off Arizona I'LL warrant that he told his mates and the teacher how the historic bird looked, having seen him with his own eyes.

One day in the spring of 1903 a tall, manly looking gentleman came into Memorial Hall. Though so manly in appearance, he seemed to have retained all the freshness of spirit of a big, wholesome boy. As he fixed his glasses upon the bridge of his nose and looked about he quickly asked, "Say is that Old Abe, the Wisconsin war eagle?" When I told him it was the very bird, he exclaimed with boyish delight, "By George! I am delighted to see him! I learned about him from my reader when I was a boy in school!" As he said this he

bounded like an athlete over to Old Abe's glass house and took such a look at him as the boy from Arizona had done. When I asked him to put his name on our register he wrote "Theodore Roosevelt, Oyster Bay, New York". The little boy from Arizona and the big President of the United States had both read in their schoolbooks about Old Abe, and both came with the same lively interest to see him. And so with thousands of others.

About three o'clock on the morning of February 27, 1904, the Madison fire bells rang out the alarm that the Capitol was on fire. A gas burner too close to an overhead pine ceiling started the blaze in a room just across the corridor from Memorial Hall. The smoke was so dense that no one could come near the door so as to save Old Abe from burning, and everything else in the room. All the pictures, relics and books were destroyed--a total lost-- the most serious of which was our War Eagle. While the great building was burning the most frequent question asked among the thousands of people standing about was, "Has Old Abe been saved?" In one form or another this sentiment was heafd over and over; "I'd reather have had Old Abe saved than anything else in the building. Money can replace almost everything else, but cannot bring him back!" Some of the boys and girls looking on cried as they talked about the old War Eagle.

And so Old Abe, the Wisconsin war eagle, became a cherished tradition--truly patriotic--that will live as long as the story of Wisconsin in the Civil War survives. There are now in the beautiful new Memorial Hall in the Capitol at Madison two fine paintings of the famous old bird. One was made

by James A. Stewart from life. It shows him in a very natural position--truly life-like. The other was painted by Miss Leila Dow, of Madison. It was made from a sketch drawn of him only two weeks before the Capitol fire. It was presented by Governor LaFollette. The two hang side by side and are highly prized. Not far away, in the new Memorial Hall in the Capitol, are the old battle flags of the Eighth regiment, alongside which he was carried during the war. A half-a-dozen feathers of him are in a frame near by.

In the Vicksburg National Military Park there stands a noble and beautiful granite shaft as a memorial of the part Wisconsin soldiers took in the campaign and siege of Vicksburg in the summer of 1863. It may be seen miles away, and is one of the most graceful memorials in the Park. On the top, more than a hundred feet from the ground, stands a large bronze figure of Old Abe, seeming to look with an eagle eye over the grounds where the young bird more than half a hundred years ago was with his regiment in the charge and the siege. At the time of the great reunion of the Blue and the Gray at Vicksburg in October, 1917, I visited All Saints College within the old siege lines, and was asked to talk to a class of young ladies there. They requested me in particular to tell them the story of Old Abe, the Wisconsin war eagle. They seemed greatly interested as I told it to them about as I have written it here.

While this next story does not necessarily concern Old Abe, it telss about one brave color-bearer, as it is recorded in the roster of the hard-fighting 37th regiment, William H. Green of York, Green county. He enlisted March 29, 1864, and was made a sergeant of his company. After his name this statement is printed:

"Recommended for promotion for gallantry in action at the battle of Petersburg, Virginia, June 17, 1864, where, after having been wounded in both legs, he crawled from the field dragging his colors with his teeth, thus saving the flag. He died from his wounds July 17, just a month after his brave deed."

His death occurred three and a half months after his enlistment. It is said that in height he was six feet four inches, the same as President Lincoln. Twice since the flag has been in its present place his son has come to see it. The story of the brave color-sergeant's death is told on a card attached to the staff of the flag he thus saved. There were thousands of other color bearers just as brave as Sergeant Green, yet whose heroism has not been recorded.

If they could only speak, the flags put in Memorial Hall in the Capitol in the spring of 1918, could tell many heroic deeds of the brave boys and young men who fought around them. Yet, though silent to mortal ears, they are still eloquent to those who listen well. They speak to every one of us whose souls are atune to the language of high ideals and self-sacrificing patriotism. I sometimes think that if one could stand before them in the stillness of the night, with no other

sound to distract his attention, he could in imagination hear stories of brave deeds, of lives freely given, that those who should live after them might enjoy the many blessings of good government and prosperity that are outs today. The dear old flags are a precious heritage to us, and we should cherish and honor them in our lives as good citizens.

Though not all may be able to look upon these tattered old flags before me that have been in the thick of the fight, let no one forget that the Stars and Stripes represent all the time and everywhere the same principles for which they were carried into battle.

The fire of the enemy focused around
The flags and the brave men who bore them,
So they were the first in the battle to fall
And the Column came rushing on o'er them.

* *

Rood, Hosea W.., Madison Wisconsin, March 1921
"A Little Flag Book" #3

Rood was Department Patriotic Instructor
for the Grand Army of the Republic

* * * \

rent against absolutism which has never failed to flow in America despite counteracting currents of great force. But in part it came from the mutual and competitive mistrust of the various religious sects toward one another. Always pragmatic, Jefferson and Madison saw the value of this, despite their own rejection of revealed religion. Variety of belief was a useful insurance against tyranny.

The history of the First Amendment since 1791, when the last of the necessary eleven states ratified the federal Bill of Rights, has been one of fluctuating interpretation. This has been most notable during the last fifty years, during which, for the most part, the Supreme Court has found that the Fourteenth Amendment enjoins the guarantees of the First upon the states, for the protection of every citizen. There has been some confusion and inconsistency: schoolchildren swear allegiance to one nation "under God," yet cannot be led in official school prayers, however nondenominational. Over a period of years, however, the trend of Court decisions has been toward strict separation of church and state, in a manner that assuredly would please Jefferson and Madison if they were here to see it. Indeed, the Justices have shown a strong penchant for citing these champions of freedom in explaining and supporting recent Court decisions.

There is nothing sacred about the reasoning of any of our ancestors, on this or any other matter. But whether one agrees with Jefferson and Madison or not, with regard to how high and impassable the wall between church and state ought to stand in a free society, they deserve to be remembered and understood, as the two among the Founding Fathers who devoted more of their minds and lives to this great problem than anyone else. They were an intellectual *avant-garde* whose probing of the relationship between religion and democracy went beyond the more or less traditional attitudes of most Americans between 1776 and 1791. Yet they were the center of a high-pressure area in the climate of opinion of their time, and their conclusions were strongly reflected in the Constitution as it finally was adopted.

Their thinking, moreover, can be fairly understood only as emerging from the matrix of the Enlightenment, of which—with such men as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, James Monroe, and even George Washington and John Adams—they were indubitably the intellectual offspring. The impact of "natural religion" on the genesis of democratic liberty, through their influence, has too often been ignored.

Writing to Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1800, shortly before he became President, Jefferson alleged certain clerical "schemes" to breach the religion clause of the First Amendment. He would oppose them with all his power, he said, "for I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." It was "Nature's God" that he was thinking of; and for that vow above all others the altar was not to be found, he believed, within the limits of any dogmatic creed.

For further reading: Church and State in the United States, *by Anson P. Stokes (Harper, 1950);* The Birth of the Bill of Rights, *by Robert A. Rutland (Collier Books, 1962).*

"Old Abe" the Battle Eagle

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

reception was less happy. This was late in 1861, and St. Louis contained a mixed population, partly Unionist and partly Confederate in its sympathies. The 8th Wisconsin at this time wore gray uniforms—in those early days of the war many Northern regiments were attired in what was already being recognized as Confederate gray, since uniforms then were provided by the state authorities, who were not always up-to-date on army regulations—and in St. Louis the secessionists cheered and the Unionists jeered, which was not at all the way to greet a good Union regiment. People even threw things at the soldiers, someone on the sidewalk called Abe a buzzard, and in the excitement he broke his cord and flew up to a chimney top, from which it took the Wisconsin boys a good half hour to recover him. It was argued that Abe had understood and resented the "buzzard" insult.

Legends began to form about this unusual mascot, and they are embalmed in a sprightly book called *The Eagle Regiment,* which an anonymous regimental historian produced in 1890, when memories had perhaps grown slightly hazy. It was asserted that in St. Louis, despite the people who jeered, the regiment received, and firmly rejected, an offer of $500 for Old Abe. It was also said that the regiment had another mascot, a small dog named Frank, who became such a pal of the eagle that it would catch rabbits and squirrels for the bird to eat, the friendship turning, at last, to bitter enmity when Old Abe, on short rations, tried to eat Frank himself. It was related, doubtless with much truth, that in camp Old Abe was something of a nuisance. He had long since grown so well adjusted to military life that his tether had been discarded, and he got into everything, tipping over pails of water, snatch-

ing any rations that were left around, and now and then, just for fun, tearing up clothing that had been washed and hung out to dry. Foragers who came in with poultry requisitioned from secessionist chicken coops never dared leave the loot unguarded. Old Abe would get it, every time.

Abe made a friend out of the soldier who carried him. He got his drinking water by tipping his head back and letting the soldier pour water down his throat from a canteen. On occasion he would shake hands (as it was called) with this man, taking the soldier's finger in his beak and chuckling hoarsely as he pretended to bite it. The bearer insisted that Abe had an elephant's memory; if anyone teased him he would remember it and would attack his tormentor the next time they met, even if it was weeks later. No soldier not a member of the 8th Wisconsin, it was said, could come near him.

By the regulations Old Abe was not supposed to be taken into battle, and when action began he was left in camp. There were times, however, when he got under fire, and the men told tall stories about this. In an engagement at Farmington, Mississippi, it was said, Old Abe's perch was lugged up to the firing line. Bullets were coming in pretty thick, and the soldiers were ordered to lie down—whereat Abe got off his perch and crouched low on the grass, flapping back up to the crossbar as soon as the men stood up to advance. It was also said that he went all through the hot battle of Corinth, Mississippi, in the fall of 1862, screaming and flapping his wings when the men cheered. It was in this battle that he left his position, soaring up over the battle and coming down at last on the extreme left of the regiment, where his bearer recovered him.

The stories about this eagle's conduct under fire may have gained something in the postwar years, but they were devoutly believed by the veterans. It was insisted that in action Old Abe, wreathed in smoke, would peer up and down the line, as if trying to see how things were going. Sharp musket fire seemed to depress him, but the heavy thump-bump of artillery fire stimulated him; he would stand erect, screaming and flapping his wings. Now and then, when things were especially hot, he would give a series of five or six especially shrill screams, ending in a startling trill which (as the veracious regimental historian declared) "was perfectly inspiring to the soldiers."

He had a sort of vocabulary, which got full play when there was no fighting going on. When surprised by anything, he would give a wild whistle. When he knew he was about to eat he would chuckle gleefully; when he recognized an old friend he would give vent to a delicate little coo, almost like a dove. When rations were short he would utter a complaining whine. His bearer was officially detailed to forage liberally for him on the surrounding countryside, all in all, Old Abe seems to have fared pretty well.

During the Vicksburg campaign, the 8th Wisconsin was formed on parade one day for inspection by Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman. Old Abe was on his perch, and when the men cheered their generals he flapped and screamed, and both generals doffed their hats to him in response.

Old Abe reached his full manhood, or eaglehood, apparently just about the time his army career came to an end. In the summer of 1864 the 8th Wisconsin "veteranized"—that is, a majority of the men signed up for another three-year hitch, those who refused to re-enlist being known as "non-veterans." That fall the non-veterans were sent back home, their time having expired, and they took Old Abe with them; at which point the feathers on his head and neck turned white, so that the men called him their "baldheaded veteran."

At Madison, Wisconsin, Old Abe was formally presented to the governor of the state. He was officially given quarters in a basement room of the state capitol, and in good weather he had the run of Capitol Park.

Now began his career as distinguished veteran. He was lugged off to the Republican convention in 1868 which nominated Grant for the Presidency, and no old soldiers' reunion in Wisconsin was complete without him. He went to the huge national encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, at Chicago, in 1875, and the next year the state legislature voted funds to send him to the Philadelphia Exposition. Meanwhile, he lived in state in his basement room. Whenever a former eagle-bearer from the old regiment came in (there had been six of them, altogether) Old Abe (on the word of the regimental historian) would recognize him, rubbing his head against the man's cheek and gurgling and clucking with pleasure.

His end came in 1881, when there was a minor fire in the capitol basement which produced great clouds of smoke. This bird who had breathed smoke on the battlefields got a little too much of it this time, and it suffocated him. He had had a twenty-year career, and there never was an American eagle like him . . . on the word of the 8th Wisconsin, veteran volunteers.